

## BARNSELEY DIALECT IN EVIDENCE

by Cedric Sellers

This is not an account of Dialect in Barnsley speech today, but is an extract from the reporting of one of the worst tragedies in the history of that town and of the nation, the Oaks Colliery disaster. Details are taken from a report entitled *Narrative of the events connected with the explosions of December 12/13, 1866* (HM Inspector of Coal Mines - Home Office Report Number 18467) and printed by E. Moxon, Barnsley. The incident was all the more tragic in that men engaged on rescue work were killed in a violent explosion on the second day.

The inquest report presents an interesting insight into the social structures and customs of the time. For example, the comment that amongst the spectators was Mr John Normansell, the Secretary of the South Yorkshire Miners' Association. (Imagine the situation if the Union Secretary today could only act as spectator.) The reporter thought it sufficiently noteworthy to record that "during part of the day 'several ladies' were in court". The desperation of the 'orphan' child is illustrated in the evidence of Jane Jackson who said that John Jackson was not her child but had been brought to her by her own children and as no-one had claimed him she had adopted him. Naturally enough in an enquiry of this kind there were many references to purely mining terms and a list of the more common ones is attached. However, there are enough uncommon or disused terms together with the everyday speech of the people to interest us here.

Mr Mammatt, the Colliery Surveyor, was first questioned and he was asked by the H.M. Inspector of Mines, "Have you been able to ascertain how many work-people were in the mine on the day of the explosion?" He replied, "About 300. There were about 130 colliers with sets of tools. Each of these sets of tools would have one and some two *hurriers*." Hurriers were young



boys and men, whose job it was to keep the collier supplied with corves into which he filled his coal and the hurrier would take the full corves out of the working place where they could be transported away. It is thought that at this period the hurriers were employed by the colliers and not by the Oaks Colliery Co., and that many of the boys would be the collier's own children.

The Inspector of Mines asked, "With regard to the mode of working the coal, did you use powder or wedges?" He was told, "Wedges entirely." A little later he was to be told that "blind powder was used in the stone drift". The Colliery Surveyor was asked about the examination of goaves and he said that this work was carried out by "fire-triers" or deputies. Further questions for the Surveyor related to quantities of ventilation and as a part of this he said, "At a distance of 150yds, about 15,000 cubic feet of air goes up No.2 'jenny' per minute.

Several under-officials, workmen and a boy were called and during the questioning a measure of the awe or workmens' understanding of what was taking place comes out in the evidence of one Robert Cadman. Cadman said, "I went down in the second draw after the accident." He told of the persons who travelled into the pit before him and then related what he saw. "I saw some 'dead uns' and some 'wick uns' an' all." He then told the Court the names of the men he had seen alive and added "and the lad (Marshall) you 'tried' yesterday."

There is a hint of the use of second names when William Charlesworth tells of going into the pit along with William Barker (alias Sugden) and Thomas Needham. He stated, "When I got to the bottom I found the box-hole but had no light. We went where we heard a cry and found three boys alive. I went round the Box-hole feeling under the settle." There were no doubt many moving stories and incidents. This same witness gives his account of meeting the furnaceman. "We afterwards went to the cupola, and whilst in the drift, about fifteen yards from it, met with George Tasker, furnaceman. He was standing still on one side, holding a spragg in his hand. I said "Halloah!" The Coroner, "Never mind what you said. What did you do?" Witness, "Why, we were forced to speak to him. We



afterwards pulled out the fire. There was a little fire on the back of No.1 furnace and fire all round No.2 but none in the middle. After we had pulled the fire out we sat down and waited perhaps ten minutes to see if it kindled up again. There was some air there coming direct from the downcast shaft. After a while the fire brightened up a bit and we pulled it out again. We sammed the cat up from the flags and took it with us to the bottom. The cat was lying dead just where the man said he had been laid, but it did not appear to be burnt or scorched." Earlier Tasker in evidence had said, "I lifted my head up after I was knocked down and saw the kitten spinning round, like a 'whirlwind', and making a noise. I got hold of it with my arms, I then went to sleep."

Charlesworth was called to give evidence again and this time when questioned about air doors he went on to say, "There are two doors pretty nigh to the downcast, top side of the old north level." A little later he goes on to explain that he and Barker (alias Sugden) went back to the engine plane to *Billy Wood's jinney*. This last expression is interesting in that it identifies a person with a length of roadway. It has been common in the mining industry in the past to identify the leader of a team of men who have carried out a major construction in this way by naming the site after him. Explaining what they had done and where they had been, Charlesworth went on to say, "We might have got about fifty or sixty yards when we found some stuff nailed to some *puncheons*. These were boards about five or six inches broad and nine feet long."

Charlesworth was questioned about the emission of gas in the places where the men worked and he went on to explain that from time to time there were small quantities of gas. He then went on to say where they did find gas. "That was in the *break* behind the face. They always had to go there for *packing*. They were never allowed to take a lamp behind the *clogs*. He then gave testimony of his experience. "I have wrought in the *Barnsley Bed* of coal over thirty years. I have got from a *trapper* up to being a *deputy* or *fireman*."

The next witness was George Frost, a miner, whose evidence followed similar lines to that of Charlesworth. He describes the scene they found underground and makes



unusual use of the word *sadly* when he said "The stools and cans were upset and *sadly* smashed." George Minto, an under-viewer at Barnsley's Mount Osborne Colliery used the expression again to indicate the severity of the burning. He said, "We went through by Thomson's boxhole where we found many bodies *sadly* burnt."

Not surprisingly the evidence of the officials is not so rich in dialect expressions as that of the workmen, nevertheless they are interesting to compare and do quote a fund of mining terms. John Platts an under-viewer at Wharncliffe Silkstone Colliery went to the Oaks Colliery on the first day of the disaster. Like others who gave evidence he explained in detail what he saw. He stated that in the drift they found thirty four bodies and went on to relate, "The whole of those in the drift were not burnt, but appeared to have died from the *after-damp*." He later said, "I went down the slant about thirty or forty yards, but found that the *choke-damp* was so bad that I could not get any further." Elsewhere in the evidence this man refers to *fire-damp* in the *goaves*, whereas Minto the underviewer at Mount Osborne Colliery speaks of *goaf*.

James Marsh, a miner, colourfully described the events of his excursion underground on the day of the explosion. He uses the word *tumbled* when clearly he means 'fall of roof' and *fall* when he means 'pile of debris'. He said, "We went a little further and found the pass-by had *tumbled* in. We went over the *fall* and found a lad (dead) lying under a donkey. Barker said he had two sons further on and we tried to get to them, but had to turn back as the air was so bad. We then got into the back travelling road and left the bodies of the two lads at Jones jinney as Barker failed there and we had to get him out." Presumably by failed Marsh was saying in a gentle way that the man had broken down emotionally.

Earlier it was suggested that the hurriers were employed by the colliers direct and this seems to be reinforced by a statement by William Gibson, a coal miner who was giving evidence of having worked at the Colliery prior to the explosion. "While I worked in the pit the ventilation was very bad at my place. My master, Andrew Barker, complained of the gas . . . . I was set on as a hurrier to Barker." Barker was obviously a known character for when another collier relates the meeting of



a deputation with Mr Dymons the Colliery's managing partner, William Ward said, "We saw Mr Tewart and Mr Dymond together . . . . We reported that Andrew Barker had stated . . . that he had been knocked up in about three and half hours. Mr Dymons said that Barker must have been 'beering'." The witness said that the deputation went down the pit with Mr Tewart and Mr Dymond and on visiting Andrew Barker's working place had said Barker did not seem fit for work with getting drink. The Company lawyer - "He had been on the spree for two days, had he not?" The Company cashier was called to give evidence about the deputation's meeting with Mr Dymond. The statement that the cashier's books were open to all at the Colliery comes somewhat as a surprise!

Attempts were made to identify the first cause of the explosions and a deputy William Stephenson was questioned about shotfiring in the *stone drift*. He tells of having fired three shots that night but there is a touch of humour in his description of an earlier shot-firing incident when the shothole had been charged and set by workmen and obviously a short fuse was used. "He fetched me to light a shot, and I went to light it. When I lit it I had to gallop!" During the questioning Stephenson dropped out several good dialect expressions including, "I got anent where the drift was being made." and a reference to the drill hole, "It must have brussen the bottom out partly." Perhaps his most meaningful comment was that made in reply to the foreman juror who questioned him about the shotfiring operation. Juror, "Did you ever notice how far the fire seemed to come?" Stephenson replied, "No, I did not look, I kept my head out o' t' gate." He went on to say that after putting powder and fuse into the shot hole, "then a bit of straw made like a ball to take all the loose powder down with it."

Was Stephenson tired by the questioning or harrassed? He seemed to have answered well to this point and then the reporter writes, "the witness, who appeared 'non-plussed' created much laughter by his attempts to make his language intelligible." Stephenson was not quite finished and went on to explain that the lower end of the shot hole seemed to have bursted out. He added that gas lamps in the pit bottom were sometimes blown out by the shotfiring. There is an interesting use of the word.



*chair* by the lawyer Blackburn when he asks Stephenson the question, "Have you known the working of the *chair* put out the lights near the bottom of the shaft." It is surprising that this word should be introduced by a lawyer, although fairly common, when the Colliery carpenter had used the more general synonymous term *cage* in his evidence. The lampman also spoke of the "waft of the cages which sometimes blew lights out near the pit bottom."

The colliers, famed for sticking together in times of trouble seem to have maintained a common front on this occasion. One must suspect that there were instances where they sought to get the better of the questioner. For example, when William Wood was asked by a juryman, "Can you tell us anything that you either saw or did that is worth hearing further?" He replied, "I don't think I can, for I wasn't there." Surely, William Youle, a lamp cleaner, spoke tongue in cheek when he said, "I don't think there was a man or lad in the pit who would have done such a thing as pick a lock."

The management of the Colliery seems to have been singularly adventurous, having earlier tried a cutting machine and piped methane from the workings and used it to light the roadways in the pit bottom. Without too much detail there are indications that the workforce was organised with mention of a meeting at Hoyle Mill and a deputation to meet the manager. Undoubtedly the language of the management and the men identifies them with their own profession and era.

#### *Glossary of words appearing in the report*

Afterdamp	The noxious gas resulting from a colliery explosion. This <i>afterdamp</i> is called <i>choakdamp</i> and <i>surfeit</i> by the colliers and is the carbonic acid gas of chymists (Hodgson - <i>A description of Felling Colliery.</i> )
Anent	Concerning (OE has <i>on efen</i> - 'on a level with') (OED)



Bahn	Going to. In evidence Richard Hunt said, 'they were bahn to fire the shot'.
Bend-up	To bend away. Signal given in coal mining to intimate that the cage is to be brought to bank. (EDD)
Benks	(i) A vault in a mine. (ii) A section of a pit allotted to several colliers. (EDD)
Board-gate	cf. <i>Board</i> also written <i>bord</i> . A working-place or passage in a coal pit, excavated at right-angles to the line of clearance. (EDD)
Box-hole	Underground office or meeting place. cf. <i>Box</i> - A benefit or friendly society possessing a common box. (EDD) A local friendly society. (Nicholson)
Brattice	A portion, either of wood or strong hempen sheeting placed in the shaft of a pit etc. for the purposes of ventilation. (EDD)
Break	A place of discontinuity in the coal seam such as a slip, fracture or cleat. The surfaces are in contact or slightly separated. The term is also applied to a fracture or crack in the roof beds as a result of mining operations. (Nelson)
Chair	The frame used for drawing up materials and men from the mines. (Mawe)
Choke-damp	See <i>after-damp</i> .
Clog	(i) A log of wood. 'Yulelog' called 'Yule clog'. (EDD) (ii) A log of wood used as a stool. (EDD) (iii) Mining - A sledge loaded with stones and dragged round by the gin, to which it acts as a brake. (EDD) In



fact, in this case, it is thought to refer to a piece or pieces of wood used as roof support on the edge of the goave.

Corves	A basket of pined hazel rods in which coals were formerly brought to the surface of a coal pit. (EDD)
Cribs	(i) A circle of wood wedged tight in a pit shaft, to make a foundation for walling when the strata are loose. (ii) The lining of wood or iron put round a pit shaft to dam back the water in water-bearing strata. (EDD)
Cupola	A smelting house or furnace. A ventilating furnace. (EDD)
Deputy	A minor collier official. (EDD) The man who lays the plates and sets the timber for the hewers and has charge of a district of the mine.
Downcast	The shaft down which fresh air passes into a mine. (EDD)
Draw	One complete traverse or wind of the cage through the pit shaft. cf. Draw (of ore) - Ore underground ready and waiting to be drawn up the shaft. (Kirkham)
Drift	A passage or tunnel driven into the ground either to explore or reach the coal etc. (EDD)
Engine Plane	A road on which the tubs are hauled along by ropes from a stationary engine. (Nicholson)
Firedamp	Light carburetted hydrogen gas. (Nicholson)
Fireman	In this context he is thought to be



	referring to the under-official post of shot-firer or shot-lighter. (The man responsible for igniting the shot.)
Fire-tryers	cf. <i>firetrying</i> - searching for fire-damp. (EDD)
Flag	Flat slab of rock for paving. Pavement made of these. (OED)
Furnace-man	cf. <i>furnace</i> - a large fire used for ventilating purposes in a mine. The man who attends to the ventilating furnace. (EDD)
Getter	A man employed in breaking down the coal which has been previously kirved. (Nicholson)
Goaf	Also in form <i>goave</i> . The space left in a coal mine after the whole of the coal has been extracted. (EDD)
Hanger-on	cf. <i>hanging-on</i> - a place in the shaft where tubs are taken out and put in. (Nicholson)
Hurrier	cf. <i>hurry</i> - to transport or convey, especially to transport coal from the face of the working to the bottom of the shaft. 'A horse hurries coals', (W. Yks.). Hence <i>hurrier</i> , a person, generally a boy, who pushes the coal <i>corves</i> along the colliery roads.
Intake	An inhalation, a drawing of breath. The airway along which the fresh air is conducted into a mine or district. (EDD)
Jenny	Also <i>jinney</i> . A gravity operated haulage system. In this case <i>jenny</i> is the roadway on which such a haulage probably operated.



Level	A drain or gallery in a mine. "The sinking to shafts is followed by the driving of levels." (EDD)
Motties	A small information disc. 'Allowances for explosives, drills and motties - per ton Os. 1d.' (YMA) Synonymous with 'token' which Nicholson describes, "A piece of metal, tin or leather having stamped into it some distinguishing mark by which the owner may be known. It is from 1½ to 2 inches long, by 1 to 1½ inches broad and either oval, round or oblong."
Nigh	Near. Extensive with 'nighest', 'nighly', 'nighish'. (EDD)
Overcast	An arrangement carried overhead for the purpose of ventilation. Specially applied to an <i>air-crossing</i> (EDD) ( <i>Air-crossing</i> = an arched way of wood or bricks by which one current of air is carried over another or the same current after having traversed its district or panel of workings. (Nicholson))
Packing	cf. <i>pack</i> - a rough wall to support the roof of a mine and to form a roadway for air. (W. Yks) "The elder Danforth then came up, and seizing Grice by the throat pushed him against a <i>pack</i> ." (Yorks. <i>Evening Post</i> 24/2/1899) (EDD). Hence <i>packing</i> - the material and debris used to make a <i>pack</i> .
Punch	cf. <i>punch</i> - a pit prop. (EDD)
Puncheon	A pit prop, a support for the roof. (EDD)
Rapped	cf. <i>rap</i> - to knock up, arouse by knocking. To signal to the banksman at a colliery. (EDD)



Reeking	cf. <i>reeky</i> - smoky, smoking, fumes, smell. (EDD)
Runners	cf. <i>runner</i> - an iron plate at the side of a fire to contract it and save fuel. (EDD)
Sadly	This is taken to mean 'excessively'. The text referred to <i>sadly</i> smashed and <i>sadly</i> burned. cf. <i>sad</i> - bad, ill, in bad health, very bad. (EDD)
Sammed	cf. <i>sam</i> - to gather or scrape together, to collect, pick up. Generally used with 'together' or 'up'. "He sammed up a stone" ( <i>Tom Treddlehoyle's Bairnsla Annual</i> - 1847). (EDD)
Settle	A bench with high backs and arms. (OED)
Spragg	A short prop of timber used to support the roof of a mine, while the men are at work under-cutting. (EDD) To prop up, support.
Stone drift	A tunnel driven through strata adjacent to the coal. (EDD)
Stoppings	cf. <i>stopping</i> - (i) A wall built into an excavation in a pit to give direction to a current of air. (ii) The blocking up of disused roadways. (EDD)
Sump	(i) A portion of the shaft below the working level where water collects before being pumped to the surface. (ii) That portion of the shaft kept a yard or more in advance of the drift or pit. (EDD)
Trapper	cf. <i>trap</i> . A ventilating door in a pit. (EDD) Hence <i>trapper</i> , a boy employed to attend to the trap-doors of a mine. (Greenwell)



Viewer	The manager of a colliery. "Officials and men have each their duties clear and unmistakable. They rank much in the following order: viewer, under-viewer, overman, back overman, deputy, hever etc." (EDD)
Wedges	An implement for splitting coal, fire-wood etc. A sharp or flat pointed iron or steel tool used for splitting and breaking coal or stone. (EDD)
Wending	To turn around. To go; to walk. (EDD)
Wick	Living - a dialect form of 'quick' as in the prayer book version "the quick (live) and the dead."
Wrought	Worked, laboured, performed, struggled. (EDD)

#### References & Abbreviations

EDD	J. Wright (ed.), <i>English Dialect Dictionary</i> , Oxford, 1898-1905.
Greenwell	G.C. Greenwell, <i>A Glossary of Terms used in the Coal Trade of Northumberland and Durham</i> , London, 1849.
Kirkham	N. Kirkham, <i>Derbyshire Lead Mining Glossary</i> , Leanington Spa, 1949.
Mawe	Mawe, <i>Minerology</i> , 1802.
Nelson	Nelson, <i>Dictionary of Mining</i> .
Nicholson	W.E. Nicholson, <i>A Glossary of Terms used in the Coal Trade of Northumberland and Durham</i> , Newcastle, 1888.



- OED            H.W. & F.G. Fowler, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, Oxford, 1950.
- YMA            *Yorkshire Miners Association, NUM (Yorkshire Area) Price Lists and Agreements*, 1947.